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Hilsman Tried to Break Taboos

*Records Show Expert on Far East
Wasn't Afraid to Assume Risks*

The formation of Roger Hilsman as Assistant Secretary of State for the Far East surprised and saddened Americans. There can be no doubt of his desire to return to his alma mater. But his work in the State Department seemed to offer for his energy and scholarship. President Johnson is not alone in hoping that Mr. Hilsman will often be available for public duties. He is too valuable a public servant to be permanently removed from Washington.

We have gone a long way from the days when the Far Eastern offices in the State Department were positions of prejudice as well as of difficulty. When President Kennedy persuaded Mr. Harriman to become the Assistant Secretary, there was universal praise of an admirable appointment, and Mr. Harriman's services confirmed these expectations. As his successor, Mr. Hilsman showed the same independence and courage in an area where these qualities had not always been conspicuous in the past.

While still the intelligence officer for the State Department, Mr. Hilsman played an important part in establishing the existence of the Russian missiles in Cuba. Though not one of the inner circle of advisers who worked closely with President Kennedy in that crisis, he was an essential member of that tightly knit enterprise. When Mr. Harriman became Mr. Rusk's deputy, his own appointment as Assistant Secretary was almost inevitable and was widely applauded.

Mr. Hilsman, a graduate of

West Point with an excellent war record, was invulnerable to the charge that he favored weak policies in meeting the Communist challenge. No one who knows him has ever associated Mr. Hilsman with weakness in anything. But his scholarship and responsibility also prevented him from believing that mere toughness is a virtue. Strength had to be the servant of a wise policy, and without wisdom the exercise of power could be an invitation to disaster. Those were the broad rules which guided his conduct.

Not so long ago he bravely made a speech on China that showed he was not willing to be the prisoner of ancient prejudices. Mr. Hilsman was always aware that as an Assistant Secretary he had the power to define American policy. He therefore spoke to the Commonwealth Club in San Francisco with a mixture of caution and boldness. There was a reaffirmation of old policies but there also was the new note that the United States shunned a permanent antipathy to China and would respond favorably to a peaceful change in Peking's program.

It has been evident for many years that no important debate on China can take place in the United States unless people at the top in Washington are ready to assume certain risks. Mr. Hilsman took those risks, pointed to fresh paths, and opened a debate that will continue long after he leaves his present position.

A huge file in the State Department records the

reactions to his Chinese speech. Almost every paper and magazine commented on it, and Asia's response was also voluminous. Neither Formosa nor China liked the speech, and a few traditional critics in America expressed their resentment.

But the overwhelming reaction, alike in this country and in Asia, supported Mr. Hilsman's effort to break through old taboos and to discuss relations with China in the same responsible spirit that marks the discussion of other problems. Where he led, others will be proud to follow, and slowly a debate on China can take place without an official tumbling into automatic trouble if he refuses to repeat outmoded but familiar slogans.

There has never been any validity in the campaign which seeks to blame the State Department for our misfortunes in Viet Nam. Of all the senior officials who have grappled with these problems, no one can surpass Mr. Hilsman's personal knowledge of guerrilla tactics in times of actual warfare. His criticism of political conditions in Viet Nam and of military dispositions in that country have often been verified by later events. At all times he has supported a firm policy, seeing a Communist victory in South Viet Nam as a major defeat for American purposes throughout Southeast Asia.

President Johnson needs the help of the people appointed to the State Department by President Kennedy. Our regret at Mr. Hilsman's departure must be tempered by the hope that he is not beginning a trend.

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